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## Propaganda, Truth Duel in Crowd Counts

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So many gay and lesbian activists attended this month's rally at the state Capitol that it was impossible to count them. But that did not stop the pundits from claiming to know just how many were there.

State Police Cmdr. Dennis Williams said that "years and years and years" of experience gauging demonstrations convinced him that no more than 3,000 to 4,000 protesters gathered Oct. 11 at the building's west steps.

"Anything over 5,000 I would have to seriously challenge," Williams said. "We pretty much know what numbers will fit in here."

Torie Osborn, executive director of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center, said that after two decades of rallies she was sure 12,000 people had turned out to denounce Gov. Pete Wilson's veto of a homosexual rights bill.

"I've done so many of these, you just get a sense of it," Osborn said. "There's no way it was less than 10,000."

In an age of instant public opinion, crowd counting has become an unbelievable numbers game.

A generation after widespread protests altered the course of the Vietnam War, the ability to mass bodies has become a crucial gauge of almost any cause, whether people are welcoming home troops, debating abortion, cheering a visiting dignitary or, as in recent days, rallying for gay rights.

A huge turnout—or at least the perception of one—can capture the media's attention, sway elected officials and, ultimately, force a nation to rethink long-held assumptions. A disappointing showing can mean relegation to the radical fringe.

As a result, crowd estimates—dished out with an air of certitude—often are fabrications, wishful thinking or wild guesses. Without a turnstile to prove anyone wrong, it is usually politics—not a desire for accuracy—that most shapes the numbers.

“Telling the size of a crowd is in the same category as uttering an effective slogan,” said Neil Smelser, a UC Berkeley sociologist. “As a measure of public sentiment, it’s not very precise. But as rhetoric and symbolism, it matters very much.”

The discrepancies occur every time people gather in the streets, whenever ideology, money or prestige is at stake.

At the beginning of the Persian Gulf War, either 2,500 or 15,000 protesters marched on Los Angeles City Hall. Earlier this month, anti-abortion demonstrators in the South Bay formed a human chain that might have had as few as 10,000 links or as many as 25,000. When Nelson Mandela visited the city last year, the crowd was initially set at 3,000, then revised to 15,000.

The Los Angeles Marathon, vying to overtake New York City’s race, drew 250,000 spectators, or more than 1 million, depending on who did the counting. At Fiesta Broadway, last April’s Latino street fair, estimates ranged from 500,000 to 1 million. And at the L.A. Festival last September, between 3,000 and 30,000 people attended some of the events.

“It’s all spin control,” said Laura Myers, a reporter for the Associated Press who covered anti-war protests this year in San Francisco, where estimates at one rally ranged from 20,000 to 200,000. “If they want a bigger crowd, they just say there’s a bigger crowd.”

Part of the problem is the dynamic nature of a crowd. Even an objective counter must contend with a huge number of bodies, ebbing and flowing over an extended period of time, usually in a space with no fixed boundaries.

George Berklacy, chief of public affairs for the National Park Service in Washington, said he used to deal with such fluctuations by relying on the SWAG system—“scientific wild-ass guess.” In fact, few police agencies have a method for calculating crowd sizes. And officers, who usually end up doing little more than educated eyeballing, often have little interest in providing the so-called “official estimate.”

“There is no formula,” former Pasadena Police Lt. Gregg Henderson said when asked whether crowd counts at the annual Tournament of Roses Parade were overblown. “You go up in the air and you take a look down, and it’s like, ‘Yep, a whole lot of folks down there, probably about a million.’ ”

In the absence of a formula, chaos rules. Police often are accused of low-balling the numbers, organizers are charged with inflating them, and reporters are faced with estimates so wildly disparate as to be left wondering whether those doing the counting actually attended the same event.

Police argue that demonstrators—regardless of ideology—are inexperienced crowd gaugers who exaggerate the numbers to further their agenda. Activists say officers pump



up the numbers at wholesome affairs, such as holiday parades, but routinely underestimate crowds at events they perceive as unpatriotic or socially disruptive.

“They want the numbers to come out low because they think we’re un-American,” said Jerry Rubin, a Venice peace activist and director of the Los Angeles Alliance for Survival. “If there’s any exaggeration on our part, it’s only to offset their low estimates ... not to be dishonest, just to bring it back to the truth.”

No one, it seems, is immune to the temptation. When Pope John Paul II visited Los Angeles in 1987, police scrambled to estimate the crowd along his seven-mile motorcade route. William Booth, now an LAPD deputy chief, initially put the number at 500,000 to 700,000, but later revised it to a more earthly 300,000.

“If we were going to err,” said Booth, when asked to explain the larger estimate, “we figured we’d err on the side of the Pope.”

The White House got into the act last November, when President Bush addressed thousands of enthusiastic Czechs and Slovaks who had packed Wenceslaus Square in Prague. Reporters gauged the crowd at slightly more than 100,000—a number they based on the Czechoslovak government’s calculations about how many people fit into the square.

Rather than celebrate what had been the President’s largest live audience, White House staffers spent much of that night furiously trying to persuade members of the media that the crowd had been closer to 800,000—a good two-thirds of Prague’s population.

One Bush aide accused a reporter for a major East Coast newspaper of having “insulted the Czech people and the President” by using the lower number.

Probably more than any other issue on the national agenda, abortion has been at center court in the numbers game. Activists on both sides of the debate have staked their legitimacy on large crowds, as if trying to demonstrate that they have enough people to win a coast-to-coast plebiscite.

In 1989, organizers of an abortion rights rally in Washington contended that they drew more than 600,000 people to the Capitol Mall. When Park Service police insisted that the number was no more than 300,000, the president of the Fund for the Feminist Majority accused the officers of being Bush Administration pawns.

Same place, following year, anti-abortion groups were determined to outdo their ideological foes. In a unique glimpse at that process, captured in an ABC-TV special about the abortion debate, National Right to Life Committee President Dr. John Wilke is shown preparing to announce the size of the rally:

“I think we should just go on and say 500,000 or whatever,” Wilke says.

“It may be closer to seven,” an unidentified voice adds. “How about that?”

“I like seven,” Wilke says.

“Call it seven,” the voice says.

“OK, you talked me into that,” Wilke says.

When Park Service police put the crowd at 200,000, three Republican members of Congress, including Rep. Robert K. Dornan of Garden Grove, called the officers to Capitol Hill and grilled them over what they considered exceedingly conservative estimates.

“Getting an accurate count can be critical,” Dornan said in an interview. “In the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, there are a few weak-hearted souls who do base policy on crowd size.”

How the media portray the size of a crowd can greatly affect whether a demonstration is perceived as successful. If reporters and their editors consider a rally to be large, it affects the tone of the story and can enhance its placement in the newspaper, according to New York-based pollster Murray Edelman. If there is a sense that the turnout is small or disappointing, he said, the story often diminishes in significance.

Editors say they weigh many factors besides sheer numbers when deciding the news value of a rally. Who the protesters are, where they are demonstrating and how they are behaving all play into the equation.

“You can say you got a kazillion people ... but that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re going to get on Page 1,” said Washington Post city editor Phillip Dixon. “It depends on what the issue is and whether there’s a real sense that it’s something that means a whole lot to other people.”

On Jan. 19, four days after the first shots of the Persian Gulf War, there were dozens of anti-war protests across the country, but much disagreement in the media over just how much they meant.

One rally in San Francisco—probably the largest in the nation up to that point—exemplified the conflicting ways in which newspapers report crowd tallies and the relative importance they are assigned.

The San Francisco Examiner put the story on the front page under the headline: “Biggest Peace Rally Since ‘71.” The article quoted police as saying 40,000 people had attended, while organizers said more than 200,000.



The Los Angeles Times briefly acknowledged the rally in a nationwide protest wrap-up on Page 3, saying, without attribution, that 20,000 people had demonstrated in San Francisco.

Gloria La Riva, one of the organizers of the San Francisco rally, said she believes the low count used by some newspapers trivialized a significant outpouring of sentiment. "It has to be clarified for history," she said.

Several studies have suggested that a publication's political bent may be responsible for the widely varying crowd estimates.

In a 1974 "Journalism Quarterly" article, Australian psychology professor Leon Mann compared crowd counts for anti-Vietnam War rallies to the editorial positions of two dozen newspapers across the country. After one 1965 protest in Washington, he found that newspapers with a dovish stance reported crowd estimates as high as 50,000. More hawkish newspapers reported the crowd as low as 7,000.

In the daily crush of events, a reporter has few tools for knowing which numbers to believe. More than two decades after the Columbia Journalism Review called crowd counting "the last area of fantasy" in the news business, it is as imprecise as ever.

Some journalists simply accept the police estimate as the official count. Others use a conservative understatement, saying that "thousands" gathered. If there is a large discrepancy, most Times reporters give the range of estimates and attribute them.

Marty Linsky, a lecturer on public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, believes that none of those methods are adequate.

"I'm relying on you to sort it out for me," Linsky said of the press. "We need truth, not balance."

Probably the most accurate formula for crowd counting—and the one employed by the Park Service in Washington—is to measure the boundaries of the gathering, then divide by the number of square feet occupied by a standing adult.

That equation, had it been applied to the Desert Storm homecoming parade last May in Hollywood, would have produced startlingly different results from honorary mayor Johnny Grant's boast of 1 million spectators—roughly the population of Manhattan Beach on every block.

Although the calculations may seem arcane, the number-crunching is based on a few rudimentary equations:

The route was 3.2 miles, or 16,896 feet long. Multiply by 2, to account for both sides of the street. Then multiply by 25, the width of the sidewalk and parking lane into which the crowd was allowed to spill. That leaves 844,800 square feet of occupiable space.

Divide by two—the number of square feet required by an adult in shoulder-to-shoulder conditions—and that leaves room for 422,400 spectators. Even granting that thousands of people were watching from windows and rooftops, it appears that the official count was more alchemy than science.

Grant explained that he was comfortable saying 1 million because it seemed that there were more people than at the annual Hollywood Christmas Parade, which is also touted as drawing a seven-digit crowd. The truth is, Grant conceded, the Christmas parade only pulls in about 750,000.

“You know, Hollywood,” he said. “It’s hype.”